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AUTHOR Robinson, Norman; Wood, Marilyn
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ABSTRACT

This study of incumbent British Columbia school board members prior to election analyzes relationships between individual members' feelings of political efficacy and trust and their decisions to seek or not seek reelection. The 60 subjects, from 24 districts, represented candidates (those members seeking reelection) and retirees (members not seeking reelection). Subjects' feelings, political experiences, and ambitions were explored in structured interviews. Tables of data and respondents' statements are presented. Conclusions include the following: (1) Members with feelings of high efficacy and trust are likely to be candidates for reelection. (2) Members with feelings of low efficacy and trust are likely to be retirees. These findings support and extend the findings of other studies reviewed for this investigation; however, the situation of incumbents must be seen to differ from that of aspirant candidates because incumbents have previous experience. Service in partisan, conflictual situations politicizes incumbents, and four types of "political gladiators" emerge. "Warriors" enjoy the political life and become the main source of candidates for re-election, whereas "the vanquished," the majority of retirees, leave the scene as defeated persons. Some, however (the "efficacious indifferents") choose to fight in new political fields, and others (the "exhausted deferentials") become tired and leave the task for others. Two pages of references are appended. (CJH)

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Why School Board Members Choose to Seek or Not Seek Re-election: A Test of Political Efficacy and Trust Theory

Norman Robinson
Simon Fraser University

and

Marilyn Wood
Maple Ridge School District

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

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Norman Robinson
Simon Fraser University

Marilyn Wood
Maple Ridge School District

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate the question of why school board members choose to seek or not seek re-election in terms of political efficacy and trust theory. A number of political theorists have identified a sense of efficacy and a sense of trust as key factors in determining the extent of an individual's particpation in the political process.

Political efficacy is defined as a person's sense and feeling that "the government is responsive to a person's actions, and that when a person participates in politics, there is some noticeable effect" (Kopinak, 1980). Persons who have a sense of political efficacy have the feeling that they can make their voices heard, that they can be personally influential and that their contributions will affect the political outcome.

Political trust is defined as a person's sense and feeling that "the government is generally helpful, beneficial, trustworthy and capable" (Simeon and Elkins, 1974). Persons who have a sense of political trust believe that government is capable of achieving the ends for which it has been established.

This study attempted to clarify the relationships between individual school board members' feelings of efficacy and trust and their decisions to seek or not seek re-election. For example, are board members who have feelings of high efficacy and high trust more likely to seek re-election than those members with feelings of low efficacy and low trust? In other words, are those board members who feel that they can be personally

effective in influencing the outcome of board deliberations and who have a belief that school boards can be effective in achieving the ends for which they were established more likely to seek re-election than those board members who have a low sense of personal influence on board outcomes and who also feel that school boards are a relatively ineffective form of school government? Or, are some other combinations of feelings of high and low efficacy and trust more likely to be related to the decision to seek re-election or not seek re-election?

Perspectives

There has been a considerable amount of study done in the United States and Canada on why individuals run for school board (McCarty, 1959; Cistone, 1974; Jakes, 1982) and also on what effect the school board experience has on the individuals who serve (Cistone, 1982; Robinson and Stacey, 1984). There has also been a considerable amount of study done on incumbent defeat among school board members (Lutz and Ianaccone, 1970; 1978; Criswell and Mitchell, 1980; Davis, 1984). There has not been, however, extensive investigation of why school board members choose to seek or not seek re-election.

Similarly, there has been considerable study of individuals' feelings of efficacy and trust and their involvement in federal and state/provincial politics (Simeon and Elkins, 1974; Welch, 1975; Iyengar, 1980; Steinburger, 1981). In a major study of regional political cultures in Canada, Simeon and Elkins (1974) developed a typology of citizens as political actors based on citizens' individual feelings of efficacy and trust. The four citizen types in the typology are as follows:

Citizen Type	Feeling of Efficacy	Feeling of Trust
Supporter	High	High
Critic	High	Low
Deferential	Low	High
Disaffected	Low	Low

The "supporters" have a high feeling of efficacy and a high feeling of trust

and come close to the conventional ideal of the trusting and active citizen. The "critics" do not really trust the government but have some confidence in their ability to affect it. These individuals are the potential activists. The "deferentials" trust the government but do not feel they have much ability to affect it. These citizens are content to have government look after their interests. The "disaffected" have neither faith in government nor a sense of being able to influence it. They are apathetic and disengaged from politics. In their national sample, Simeon and Elkins (1974) found the percentages in each of the citizen types to be: supporters (24%); critics (30%); deferentials (10%); and disaffected (34%).

Only one study (Hanke, 1984) has examined the relationships between feelings of efficacy and trust and individuals' involvement in school board politics. The data for the study by Hanke were collected in the 1982 school board elections in eight southwestern Ontario school districts. What Hanke attempted to do in this study was to test the Simeon and Elkins' typology of citizens as poltical actors at the school government level. Hanke examined the feelings of efficacy and trust among a sample of citizens and three groups of political actors in school board elections. The three groups of political actors were: 1)aspirant candidates, i.e. those seeking office for the first time; 2)incumbent candidates, i.e., those board members seeking re-election; and 3)retiring incumbents, i. e., those board members not seeking re-election. Hanke hypothesized that the sample of citizens would have lower feelings of political efficacy in relation to school board government than any of the three other political actor groups. Hanke suggested as well that incumbent candidates and retiring incumbents would have higher feelings of trust toward school board government than would aspirants and the sample of citizens. Finally, Hanke suggested that aspirant candidates would be "critics", i. e., they would have high feelings of efficacy and low feelings of trust. Incumbent candidates would be "supporters", i. e. they would have high feelings of efficacy and high feelings of trust. Retiring incumbents would be "deferentials", i. e. they would have low feelings of efficacy and high feelings of trust.

As expected, Hanke found the sample of citizens to have lower feelings of efficacy toward school board government than any of the other three

groups of political actors. In addition, it was shown that aspirants and the sample of citizens had lower feelings of trust toward school board government than did incumbent candidates and retiring incumbents. Contrary to expectations, it was found that aspirants had lower feelings of efficacy than incumbent candidates and retiring incumbents. Quite suprisingly, there was little difference in feelings of efficacy and trust between incumbent candidates and retiring incumbents. The results of the Hanke study suggest only partial support for the Simeon and Elkins typology as it applies to political actors and school government. The typology is supported to the extent that incumbent candidates are indeed "supporters", i. e., they have high feelings of efficacy and trust. The typology is also supported by the results obtained from the sample of citizens who are largely "disaffected", i. e. they have low feelings of efficacy and trust. The typology receives only partial support in terms of the results for "critics" and "deferentials". Aspirants as "critics" should have high feelings of efficacy and low feelings of trust. The results show aspirants to indeed have low feelings of trust but only moderate feelings of efficacy. Retiring incumbents as "deferentials" should have low feelings of efficacy and high feelings of trust. The results showed that retiring incumbents had moderately high feelings of efficacy and high feelings of trust. Indeed, there were only small differences between incumbent candidates and retiring incumbents in terms of their feelings of efficacy and trust.

Reviewing the results of the Hanke study, the authors of this study felt that the Hanke results could have been influenced by political environment factors. The eight school board elections studied were nonpartisan contests and were relatively issue-free. A more partisan and conflictual set of electoral contests might produce quite a different research result. Larger differences in feelings of efficacy and trust among political actors just might well surface in school board elections that were richer in partisan flavor and divisive issues. With that thought in mind, the present study in British Columbia was designed.

Data Source

School board elections in most British Columbia school districts have in

recent years become increasingly partisan contests between supporters of the government (majority) party at the provincial (state) level of government and supporters of the opposition (minority) party at the provincial level (Neilsen and Robinson, 1980-81; Robinson and Hansen, 1981). The elections are usually issue-filled and conflictual.

In 1982 in British Columbia the government party (Social Credit Party) at the provincial level enacted legislation which eliminated the fiscal autonomy of local school boards. Prior to this time, school boards had the right to determine the amount of their annual school budgets and set their mill rates to raise the needed amount. The 1982 legislation removed this right. Instead, the provincial government established the amount of each school district's budget. The purpose of the legislation was to place restraint on spending by school districts. The effect of the legislation was severe. Across the province, school programs were cut and over 2000 teachers lost their jobs through layoffs. The legislation was bitterly attacked by the provincial opposition party (New Democratic Party). The conflict between the Social Credit Party and the New Democratic Party at the provincial level was echoed at the school board level with conflicts between board members who were supporters of restraint versus board members who were opponents of restraint.

This study was done in 1984 just prior to school board election time in November. The subjects of the study were 60 incumbent school board members from 24 school districts in British Columbia. The sample of board members chosen had two strata: 1)candidates, i.e., board members seeking re-election; and 2)retirees, i.e., board members not seeking re-election. The 60 members were chosen in as balanced a manner as possible, i.e., where one member was seeking re-election and one was not seeking re-election from the same school district, both became part of the sample. Urban, suburban, and rural districts were represented.

Methods

The study used structured interviews in which feelings of efficacy and trust were explored. In addition, information was sought concerning political socialization experiences, political recruitment experiences,

board service experiences , and political ambitions to see if these factors had any effect on the decision of individual board members to seek or not seek re-election.

Two judges were given the interview data from all 60 respondents and asked to categorize each board member's feeling of efficacy and trust as being either "high" or "low". There was agreement among the judges on all but one of the 60 board members. With this one case, no agreement existed so it was eliminated from the analysis.

Results

The Candidates

The results shown in Table 1 demonstrate clearly the feelings of high efficacy and high trust experienced by candidates.

Table 1

Candidates: Feelings of Efficacy and Trust

(n=29)

Category	n
High Efficacy/High Trust	26
High Efficacy/Low Trust	3
Low Efficacy/High Trust	0
Low Efficacy/Low Trust	0

All of the 29 candidates had strong feelings of efficacy. They felt that they were capable of making their voices heard and that their contributions would be important in determining the course of political outcomes at the school government level. The way in which individual

candidates expressed their feelings of efficacy differed.

Some candidates felt that they were important as "opposition spokespersons". They felt they were needed to coalesce public and school board opposition to the provincial government's restraint program. One candidate put it this way:

I have been important as a catalyst in organizing opposition to policies of the provincial government and I have to continue to draw attention to the shortcomings of the current financing arrangements.

Candidates who supported the provincial government's restraint program felt it was important that they continue to serve as board members.

It's necessary to maintain the restraint program until the economy starts to pick up....This is a time when diplomacy is needed.... I feel the board needs leadership and I can give it.

A numbers of the candidates felt that they had an important stake in certain board programs and that their contribution was necessary to see the programs through to fruition. For example, one candidate said:

We used to have a Neanderthal policy on drugs and alcohol. We're developing a new policy in which I have been involved. I just got to see that through.

Two other candidates said:

I had planned to go to university but there are exciting things happening in the district. We are restructuring the district and I enjoy the challenge.

The superintendent is going to retire in the coming year and I want to be involved in that one.

Some of the candidates stressed the importance of their contributions to providing continuity in board operations.

Well, two other board members decided to retire so if I went too that would mean three "greenhorns" on the board and that's too many in this restraint period. I didn't want to leave the board when things are so difficult.

I can't be chairman anymore because our board has a policy of limiting the chairmanship to three years... so I want to help and give advice to the new chairman.

Several candidates indicated that they felt they had to stay on the board to prevent the board from being controlled by factions or individuals that they considered less than desirable. One candidate put it this way:

I thought I would only stay one term but then restraint became a problem. There is all this polarization.... I saw that the teachers were trying to load local school boards with their candidates....I thought that if I stayed I could lend balance.

Another candidate said:

I think I represent a balance, a more moderate stance. Our board has a strong leaning in one direction.

My personal preference would have been to retire but for one very vocal trustee. He set himself up as education critic and commenced to try to destroy the system and "to get the administration". No other trustee could work with him. I've given twelve years of blood, sweat and tears...I couldn't retire and let him have it.

On candidate felt that it was important that he continue so that a particular pressure group (Canadian Parents for French) would not have undue influence on board policies. He said:

We have this strong pressure from some parents for French immersion programs without realizing the implications of these programs.... It's important that the system not be jeopardized by a pressure group.

Finally, some candidates felt they had to stand for re-election because they perceived themselves to be superior to other persons who were candidates. One candidate put it very bluntly and clearly when he said:

I surveyed the field of candidates and thought of who might be elected and that's when I decided the school board needed me.

Another candidate said:

The guy who decided to run against me was "medieval"...you know, that stuff about teachers should work harder and be paid less. I just had to run again.

All but three of the 29 candidates had feelings of high political trust. As

indicated earlier, political trust is defined as a person's sense or feeling that "the government is generally helpful, beneficial and trustworthy"(Simeon and Elkins,1974, p. 404) and that the government is capable of achieving the ends for which it was established. The 1982 provincial legislation which eliminated the fiscal autonomy of school boards in British Columbia and resulted in a substantial reduction of the authority of these boards might have been expected to produce a big loss in political trust as it applies to school board members. This did not occur among the candidates. The board members who were candidates for re-election felt that school boards could continue to be effective government units that were capable of achieving the ends for which they were established. This was true regardless of whether the candidates were for or against the provincial government restraint program. Candidates who were in favor of the restraint program said:

With the current financial situation in the province, we can't afford the dollars in all areas. I am reasonably in support of the restraint program...I am not in favor of militant approaches toward the provincial government.

The Ministry feels school boards have failed to face the financial facts...I don't think there is that much restraint on me as a trustee. Trustees have a lot of control over their destinies.

Candidates who were opposed to the restraint program still felt that school boards were accomplishing their ends. This was being done in spite of provincially-imposed obstacles.

We've lost our autonomy...we've lost our taxing power but we're still seeing some positive action in the face of restraint. We put in Project Read, French immersion and a gifted program.

The government's current stance to gain centralized control over education is retrograde... but I visit schools and I see good things, some due to the atmosphere engendered by the board...good things are happening, teachers are innovating and parents are coping in spite of everything.

We have lost our local taxing power. We have lost our local accountablility. The function of the school board was designed for local control. Still we can encourage teachers...it is immediately reflected in classrooms.

Sometimes we have ideas we'd like to put in, but instead of expanding we are cutting back...it's very depressing. Still, I see what is happening in the elementary schools. We pay visits to the schools and see students really achieving...Also in the high schools, the arts groups put on displays, the band or drama...I see great things happening in our schools.

There were three candidates with feelings of low political trust. They did not feel that school boards were capable of achieving the ends for which they were established. Still they chose to run for what appears to be reasons of personal gratification. One candidate put it this way:

We have no local decision making...trustees are forced to be hatchet men or good guys at the whim of the Minister of Education. Still, I enjoy it, I think I do a credible job, I have no axe to grind and people listen to me.

The Retirees

The results shown in Table 2 indicate that exactly half of the retirees had low feelings of efficacy and low feelings of trust.

Table 2

Retirees: Feelings of Efficacy and Trust

(n=30)

Category	n
High Efficacy/High Trust	9
High Efficacy/Low Trust	2
Low Efficacy/High Trust	4
Low Efficacy/Low Trust	15

Among this group of retirees, the feelings of low efficacy tended to be general and not specific. Typical of the comments were the following:

I just don't have the energy level to fight for things I think should be fought for. Someone younger with more energy will have to do it.

I began to become defensive about the decisions that were being made.

Many of the comments indicative of low efficacy related to the increased feeling of powerlessness experienced by board members as a result of the provincial government restraint legislation. It should be pointed out, however, that retirees who supported the restraint program also had feelings of low efficacy deriving from other sources. One retiree said:

I am frustrated with the Public Schools Act. Even with restraint and cutbacks in teachers, we can't remove the incompetent people from the system.

Another retiree explained his frustration this way:

I tried to educate others to my point of view but I have failed to alter the essential priorities of the system...I've failed to point out to teachers that the views of the public are as important as their views... I am too discouraged and depressed...at my lack of progress....There's too much party politics on the board.

The feelings of low political trust were very pronounced among the group of retirees who expressed feelings of low efficacy. These retiring board members felt that school boards were no longer capable of achieving the ends for which they were established. Some of the comments made by these retirees were:

School boards are recepients of education policy handed out by the Ministry...boards are just puppets now.... Public opinion polls carry more weight with the Minister than does the opinion of trustees.

We have completely lost our autonomy...we could do without trustees right now. It's all very frustrating. We feel we're supposed to protect the instruction of children, then that is penalized by having our budget cut.

As board members we are not being able to effect the changes that the public would like. We work within the guidelines and the board makes a decision which may be overturned by the Minister. Actually, the public has more power than school boards...because public lobbying of the Minister works. He'll listen more to the public than he will to us.

Within the group of 30 retirees there were nine retirees who had feelings of high efficacy and high trust. In this regard, these retirees resembled the vast majority of the candidates with their feelings of high efficacy and high trust. In what way was this group of retirees different from the larger group of retirees with their feelings of low efficacy and low trust?

Essentially, these board members had had positive experiences during their term of office, but were ready to move on to other challenges. In some cases, the board members were going to run for higher political office. In other cases, they were going to make a career change. These board members did believe, however, that school boards were important and were capable of meeting the challenges they faced. One of these retirees expressed himself as follows:

> The present financial legislation makes things hard, but I have seen positive changes coming about for children. We've provided options for children who would have dropped out... We've kept schools open that were planned for closure....I just became more and more interested in civic issues... the larger perspective...besides there were others from our slate who were electable and it seemed a good time for me to make a move.

A small group of the retirees(4 of the 30) had feelings of low efficacy and high trust. This group consisted of older trustees who felt they were no longer effective but were still firmly committed to the worth of school board government. A final group of the retirees (2 of the 30) had feelings of high efficacy and low trust. This small group felt that they could be politically efficacious on the school board but at the present time school boards were pretty impotent instruments of government. They just simply felt that they could spend their time more profitably elsewhere.

Candidates and Retirees: Differences in Political Socialization, Political Recruitment, Political Ambition and Board Experiences

Information was sought from both the candidates and retirees about their political socialization experiences, their recruitment into school board politics, their political ambitions and their experiences as school board members. This information was analysed to determine whether any of these factors bore any relationship to the decision to seek or not seek re-election.

The interview data revealed the candidates and retirees to be remarkably alike in terms of their political socialization, political recruitment, and political ambitions. In terms of political socialization, a majority of both the candidates and the retirees had had a long time interest in politics. One candidate said:

I've always been interested in politics, especially when I went to university.

One of the retirees said:

About 1930 I became interested in national and local politics. I started in a political party early on.

For 10 of the 29 candidates and 13 of the 30 retirees, political activity was part of their family life as children. One candidate said:

Dad was involved in various political movements--anti-war, anti-nuclear power plants. Mom was involved in the the Women for Peace movement in the States.

A remarkably large percentage of both the candidates and retirees held political party memberships. In British Columbia, Mishler (1979) reports that 7% of citizens are members of political parties. In this group of school board members, 63.3% of the candidates and 44.8% of the retirees said they were members of a political party.

In terms of political recruitment, the experiences of the candidates and retirees were similar. Most became involved because they had issue differences with incumbents or they had an issue which they wished to promote. Most said their first-time candidacies were self-initiated.

A majority of both the candidates and retirees had no political ambitions beyond the school board level. Only six of the 29 candidates and nine of the 30 retirees had political ambitions at the city council, provincial or federal level.

The big difference between the candidates and the retirees lay in the way in which they perceived their school board experiences. The candidates saw themselves as efficacious board members and they tended to take personal credit for many of the boards' achievements. The retirees, on the other hand, were more inclined to attribute any board achievement to the board as a whole.

Both the candidates and retirees expressed disappointment as well as

satisfaction about their board experiences. For example, individuals in both groups talked about the difficulties they had experienced with the provincial restraint program. The retirees felt personally frustrated with their inability to deal with this and expressed a loss of faith in the system. The candidates, on the other hand, expressed a willingness to grapple with the problems and to get on with the business of governing a school system.

In terms of school board service, the candidates had an average of 4.23 years of service. The retirees had an average of 7.03 years of service.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study have helped to clarify the relationship between individual school board members' decisions to seek or not seek re-election and their feelings of political efficacy and political trust. School board members who have feelings of high efficacy and high trust are likely to be candidates for re-election. School board members who have feelings of low efficacy and low trust are not likely to stand for re-election. These findings support and extend the findings of other studies which have shown similar relationships between political participation and feelings of efficacy and trust (Simeon and Elkins, 1974; Welch, 1975; Burke, Clarke and LeDuc, 1978; Sinclair, 1979; Iyengar, 1980; Steinburger, 1981: Hanke, 1984).

The findings of this study do suggest, however, that the Simeon and Elkins typology of citizens as political actors is not too useful to typologize school board incumbents at re-election time. Candidates and retirees do not in most cases fit easily into the categories of "supporter", "critic", "deferential" and "disaffected". Similarly, the situation of incumbents has to be seen as somewhat different from the situation of aspirant candidates at election time. The incumbents have had the tempering experience of service in political office, while the aspirants have not.

What the results of this study suggest is that at re-election time, four types of incumbent board members emerge. These types might be called:

1)Warriors - These are the incumbent board members who have feelings of high efficacy and high trust. They see themselves as personally efficacious and they see school boards as important and potentially effective means of school government. These incumbents become the main source of candidates for re-election.

2)Vanquished - These are the incumbent board members who have feelings of low efficacy and low trust. They see themselves as no longer efficacious and they see school boards as impotent instruments of school government. These incumbents form the bulk of the retirees.

3)Exhausted Deferentials - This is a small group of incumbents who have feelings of low efficacy and high trust. They perceive themselves as no longer efficacious but have faith in school boards as instruments of government. These incumbents (who are usually older) form a smaller part of the retiree group.

4)Efficacious Indifferents - This is a small group of incumbents who have feelings of high efficacy and low trust. They see themselves as having been efficacious board members but feel that school boards are relatively ineffective instruments of school government. These incumbents normally choose not to stand for re-election and instead choose to direct their energies elsewhere. In some cases, they become candidates for higher political office at the city, provincial or federal level. In a few cases, these incumbents stand for re-election and tend to view school board service as a means of achieving a degree of personal gratification.

Service on a school board can be a heady political experience. This is likely to be true if the individuals who enter the service have had a long and abiding interest in politics. It is particularly true if the election leading up to the service is a partisan contest with sharp issue differences between the candidates. It is also true if the issues which divided the candidates at election time continue to divide the successful candidates when they become board members. The overall effect of school board service in partisan, conflictual situations is one of politicizing the incumbents (Robinson and Stacey, 1984). In effect, the board members

become "political gladiators" (Mishler, 1979). Some (like the Warriors) enjoy the political life, feel successful at it and feel that they are serving the common good. Others leave the political wars. Some (like the Efficacious Indifferents) chose to fight in new fields of politics at the city, provincial or federal level. Others (like the Exhausted Deferentials) become tired and leave the task for others. Still others (the Vanquished) leave the political field of battle as defeated and disillusioned persons.

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